

## Comment

Liao Ping-hui's paper is rich and interesting. It leaves me as a commentator with an embarrassment of riches, with his copious and informed references to some of the major Western literary theoreticians of our time. His project is to argue their usefulness for understanding both individual Chinese poems and the tradition within and against which they must be read in order to be properly understood. It is here that the concept of intertextuality, so carefully traced out in the early part of the paper, is identified with the totality of the Chinese tradition, and thus it is through a knowledge of that tradition alone that a correct reading of a poem can be achieved. Here, despite the difference in critical perspective and language, there seems to be a measure of agreement with the paper given by Professor Owen in this conference. Liao Ping-hui's proposition is that whereas intertextuality has received theoretical elaboration in the West in the influential wake of Russian Formalism, it was in fact the long-established condition for the very *practise* of Chinese poetry and can even be traced in Chinese poetic commentary. This juncture (on pp. 17-18 of the mss) is what I believe the paper has been leading up to. Intertextuality is seen as a useful concept for relating a work or a poetic image to its tradition, because it revitalises the tradition either through its parody or through its non-parodistic repetition in another context. This is close to the notion of "defamiliarisation" (*ostranenie*) of Russian Formalism. At the same time it is the tradition which gives a multivocal richness to the work, and here Bakhtin's concept of the "inwardly dialogic" structure of literary language is invoked in order to show that each work must be read in the context of the global literary system that is the tradition.

Liao Ping-hui's argument that Chinese poetic commentary is entirely consonant with the contemporary Western concept of intertextuality, that indeed the Chinese tradition has forestalled the concept although characteristically it has not rationally elaborated it, is elegant and subtle. But this forestalling of modernity conceals a paradox: we might say that the concept of intertextuality is vindicated by the demonstration that it has nothing *new* to say. At this point my reservations about the large early part of the paper must come out. It competently tells the tale of the birth and

growth of the idea of intertextuality, with Bakhtin as its progenitor, Kristeva as the midwife, and Derrida, Culler, and others as its tutors. The critical account is a tale that stresses *continuity*, and intertextuality becomes thereby the place of a common belief between very diverse and often mutually opposed thinkers. To tell the critical tale of their differences would be very difficult, and it is not my intention to suggest that this could or should be done in a short paper. I just wish to make the point that Liao Ping-hui's narrative leads the concept of the dialogic via intertextuality back into the fold of the concept of literature as a closed system.

Liao Ping-hui rightly, perhaps, draws attention to the limitations of Bakhtin's perspective in the passage (p.4 of the mss) where he characterises poetry as monological in contrast with the multivoiced novel. However, I believe that it is incorrect to attribute this to Bakhtin's "static and formalistic view of literary genres" (ibid) and leave it at that. Bakhtin was not a systematic thinker, and can occasionally be faulted, but the historicising tendency of his thinking constantly undermined the categories inherited from the Formalism which he subjected to critique but within which he partly worked. The concept of "genre" was an early such Formalist casualty. Bakhtin's view, developed in his essay *On Novelistic Discourse* was that the historical advent of the novel, itself a product of social multiplicity and linguistic interpenetration, radically undermined the "monological" authoritativeness of the previous genres, like the ancient epic. This historical development was not of course a single event, for the break-up of feudal Christian "monologism" by Rabelaisian discourse, for example, took place much later within a different configuration of sociolinguistic forces. Thus, in his essay *Epic and Novel* of 1941, Bakhtin speaks of the "novelisation of other genres" which occurred as the *historical* result of the emergence of the novel. What concerns him is not the generic continuation of forms but the inner changes brought about by radical changes in the realm of social discourse as a whole. The novel is, as it were, the conscious hero of those changes. Therefore I feel that whatever criticisms can be made of Bakhtin's formulations of the "dialogic," his project must be evaluated in the context of his opposition to the systematic linguistics of Saussure, and to the systematic concept of literature of the Russian Formalists which he linked to Saussure. His rooting of the "dialogic" in the social multiplicity of actual language is an attempt to argue precisely the mediating link between literature and general experience which Formalism, like some later structuralisms, either rigorously denied or simply could not account for. It is because of

this that I wish to record my dissenting voice against the assimilation of the dialogic into systemic formalism under the generalising label of "intertextuality." Nevertheless we must be grateful to Liao Ping-hui for the erudite and forceful argument that the concept of literary tradition itself is open to fruitful reinterpretation through modern analytical tools. His argument cogently reminds us that we do not have to make a simple choice between tradition and modernity. Only a traditionalist understanding of tradition would deny the possibility of its own reinterpretation. This paper deserves considerable respect for its capacity to relate the tradition to present-day concerns and modes of understanding. It brings up one final point in relation to East-West or Chinese-Western comparison. The need is to do away with global or "total" notions of culture. When, for example, even Derrida says that Western culture is trapped eternally within a single metaphysic (even though this metaphysic may always deconstruct itself), this is really the same as globalising Chinese or Eastern culture. The comparison of static totalities must itself become static. Of course, it is no solution simply to affirm that all cultures are split, fissured, and contradictory. However such a perspective does offer a better possibility for the comparative study of the *specificity* of the processes of culture and society in the East and West. Bakhtin's approach, which is responsive to the social and historical contradictoriness of language, offers perhaps just such a possibility for the necessary questioning of all static homogenised concepts of culture.

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